Inclusivity in Study Abroad: Supported Exchange Programs?

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Abstract
This article presents a critical look at the challenges and advantages of exchange programs in US study abroad. It asks whether better support for exchange students could lead to more inclusivity in study abroad.

Universities' study abroad websites are covered with photos of groups of young students in front of important international landmarks. Rarely are they depicted actually "studying abroad" alongside local students at a host university. Most US students use "island" or "hybrid" programs run by US higher education institutions and third-party providers, which organize their academics (many in-house), travel, housing, and extracurricular activities. The more independent option through an exchange program is the least utilized, despite being the least expensive. Considering that cost is one of the primary barriers to inclusivity in study abroad, why then do universities not take better advantage of their exchange programs?

Exchange agreements allow US students to directly enroll at a partner institution while paying tuition at their home university and maintaining their financial aid. Students organize their flights and accommodation and therefore do not pay additional program fees. In fact, exchange programs are commonplace in many parts of the world, the Erasmus program in Europe being the most well-known. Host institutions boast a wide academic offering that can boost inclusivity in underrepresented majors and minors. Exchange programs also open doors for second-generation students who may already possess the required language skills. Finally, they are often developed with a larger geographical variety of host institutions, allowing for more diversity in options.

So why are US students paying more for organized study abroad?

So why are US students paying more for organized study abroad? Perhaps it is the easiest option to guarantee credit transfer? Perhaps exchange programs are too challenging, both logistically and academically? Perhaps the US ethnocentric worldview has created a perception of lower quality higher education abroad, which is not worth the home tuition fees? Or, perhaps it is the image that has been marketed and therefore students perceive study abroad programs as the only way to study abroad? While this socially accepted conceptualization of study abroad may be convenient for both the student and the university, an unfortunate consequence is that it creates US "bubbles" that limit interaction with the local environment. Is not the goal of going abroad to immerse oneself in another culture and grow from the challenges that it presents, rather than be sheltered from cultural differences? With the current uncertainty surrounding the impact of COVID-19 on study abroad, enrollment drop-offs may cause programs to become unsustainable. Perhaps it would be pertinent to further examine exchange programs, both for the opportunities they provide and the challenges they present, as a viable alternative for increasing inclusion in the uncertain future ahead.

Deeper Cultural Immersion

Often, researchers and practitioners in the field raise concerns about the lack of language and intercultural learning in study abroad, which is due, at least in part, to the lack of cultural immersion. Programs encourage interaction with the local culture through host-stays, internships, volunteering, language exchanges, and courses that support intercultural and/or global learning. Nevertheless, getting students to develop local friendships continues to be a struggle as they choose to spend time speaking in English with conational peers. Programs' structures inherently shelter students by placing them in a comfortable US center, whereas exchange programs challenge them to learn to navigate the foreign environment by interacting with local people and institutions.

Students on exchange programs must organize their academic agreement, travel plans, housing, and social life by themselves. The absence of on-site staff who act as interlocutors for program students pushes them to communicate with the host institutions' personnel to organize their stay. Orientation is also provided by the host institution,

so their first contacts are local and international students rather than US counterparts. Students take classes alongside local students, gaining yet another opportunity for social interaction and discovering new perspectives. The experience of learning in a new environment helps them develop transversal skills such as adaptability, flexibility, and intercultural teamwork ability, which are valuable competences in the twenty-first century workplace. They may not live in host families; however, common housing arrangements are in dormitories or shared flats with local students. Students learn through the experience of problem-solving in another country, which can lead to increased self-confidence and independence. The cultural immersion is inherently deeper, thus providing more opportunities for intercultural, language, and academic learning.

Too Much Challenge?

Nevertheless, study abroad programs are popular for a reason. They guarantee that logistical matters will run smoothly and provide emotional support for culture shock as well as practical support for any problems that arise. Additionally, for those who enroll in a few local classes, programs maintain a preapproved list of courses in which past students have been successful. One could assume that students must require these supports if most programs are charging for them; however, we would be wise to reexamine which are truly necessary and furthermore, if they could be provided by the home and host institutions instead.

In the case of logistical matters, if we suppose students are independent enough to organize leisure travel for themselves, surely with today's technology millennials can book their trip and arrange their student housing online. Host institutions also do provide students with logistical information specific to their city. On the other hand, academic advising and ensuring credit recognition provide a bigger challenge. At the home university, advisors manage numerous agreements making it difficult for them to obtain a deep understanding of the intricacies of each host university's academic system, degree programs, and specific courses. Host institutions may not offer academic advising beyond providing course lists and timetables. This can result in students enrolling in incompatible courses for their academic background just to obtain credit approval. Finally, support for exchange students' social and cultural integration has improved at host institutions through the prevalence of buddy programs and an offer of local history and culture courses; however, there are no on-site personnel providing round-the-clock assistance.

Providing Support for Exchange Programs

Exchange programs have the potential to improve inclusivity in study abroad. However, more support is required to overcome curricular and cultural challenges. More information is necessary about host institutions' academic programs to ensure that students are enrolling in academically relevant classes that will allow them to be successful. Institutions must become aware of their own academic cultures to properly convey them to their partners. Courses designed to facilitate intercultural learning in study abroad could be modified for exchange programs by imparting them online during the semester. It would also be pertinent to add modules related to cultural differences in academic settings, creating a space for students to reflect on their direct enrollment experience. More research should also be done on the specific challenges of exchange students to improve their experiences. Finally, a shift in the perception of what constitutes a US study abroad program away from the service provider model is needed, if we are to successfully promote exchange programs as a viable, cost-efficient, culturally immersive option for study abroad. ◢

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